



Interview No. SAS4.21.02

Myrtle Mack Dutton

Interviewer: Elizabeth Schaaf

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Dutton: My name is Myrtle Mack Dutton. My major was voice, and my minor was piano.

Q: And when did you start studying music?

Dutton: I guess my mama was determined that I was going to study music when I was about four years old I guess. And she was my first teacher. She was a self-taught musician. In other words, someone showed her where middle C was and how it related to the staff and she taught herself. And she was determined that each of her children would learn to play the piano and we learned.

Q: How many brothers and sisters?

Dutton: One brother and one sister. And one of her methods was what I call teaching staccato. If we missed a note, she would hit us, and that was her method of teaching. And so I became an expert at staccato, making sure I hit the note and got it off real fast. [Laughter]

So, but her intentions were very, very good, and as I got older I understood what she was trying to do, what was her intent in life.

Q: Who was your next teacher? Did she teach you up until?

Dutton: She taught me until I could correct her. I was so upset that I had to take lessons — it helped my ear training. When she practiced after we'd gone to sleep, she'd hit a F sharp and it should have been a F natural, I'd call down, mommy you hit a wrong note. It should have been an F. And I so discouraged her — the poor woman gave up music — no, not really. [Laughter]

Really, just giving her payback for making me take piano. [Laughter] I was a very sweet child. [Laughter]

Q: Did she used to wish that you would have children just like you when you were growing up?

Dutton: Well, I think they'd have preferred that I would have been a nun. [Laughter] But that was a different religion.

Let's see, she was the wife of a Methodist minister, so I had several different teachers because the conferences would change and we would get transferred. So I didn't have consistent — I guess consistent music teachers until I came into Peabody. I had various teachers up to that time. I guess I had about six to seven different teachers.

Q: Where were you born?

Dutton: I was born in South Carolina.

Q: And when did you family come to Baltimore?

Dutton: Oh wow! It must have been '47 before we came to Baltimore. But Dad had had about four different parishes before he got there.

Q: And where was his first parish here in Baltimore?

Dutton: Centennial — that's down on Monument Street, not too far from Peabody.

Q: You didn't go to the preparatory department?

Dutton: No.

Q: Who were you studying with prior to auditioning at Peabody?

Dutton: I guess my last piano teacher might have been Mrs. Henrietta Holliman, over in East Baltimore. I believe she was my last piano teacher. And then, after that, I got into music at Western High School, and that's when they found out I had a voice. And so then there was a big effort to get me into Peabody. And so eventually I did.

Q: Who was your teacher at Western?

Dutton: Miss Martha Pointer. She was in charge of the Treblettes and the concert choir I guess it was called in those days.

Q: And you were in both of them?

Dutton: Yes, I was in both of those.

Q: And so you auditioned for Peabody, and she urged you to audition for Peabody?

Dutton: Yes.

Q: And what year did you enter?

Dutton: Oh dear. It would be in the archaeological records. I graduated in '57 from high school, so it was '57 to '61.

Q: And who was your voice teacher here?

Dutton: Elsa Baklor.

Q: Oh great. She was a wonderful, wonderful teacher.

Dutton: Luckily they gave me to her, and I stayed with her. It was a good thing because she was a superb teacher, but had unpopular methods, but she was a superb teacher. She understood the physiology of voice.

Q: And you had piano minor?

Dutton: Yes.

Q: And did you study organ here as well?

Dutton: No. I didn't study organ. Not here. I guess my first church job was one Wednesday evening when I was playing for my daddy's church. This was in Lynchburg [Virginia], but I was real thrilled about being his pianist, Wednesday evening pianist. And so I was sitting at — I was about five years old, and I had a bow on the side of my head. And I was playing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," and bobbing my head and kicking my legs. Well, that destroyed, you know, the ambiance that they wanted to create for the Wednesday evening services because the congregation was totally distracted by my [makes a knocking noise] "What a Friend We Have in Jesus". And singing — like I was having so much fun. So I was dismissed after two weeks.

Q: Oh no. [Laughter]

Dutton: He said, I needed my rest. Hired me and fired me on a volunteer job.

Q: Oh, that's great.

Dutton: Well, that was how I got started being a church musician.

Q: So did you work as a church musician while you were a student at Peabody?

Dutton: Yes. I did most of my work playing at the funeral home because that was more lucrative. I was the organist. I used to play for wakes and funerals. I might get three wakes a week. And so, you know it was better than tossing a hamburger.

Q: So where was the funeral home?

Dutton: It was up on Madison Avenue; it was the Lawe Funeral Home. I was there for ten years. And so that was a real blessing. And sometimes they'd send the cars to pick me up.

Q: Boy, it must have looked really elegant.

Dutton: Yes. It gave a wrong impression. Myrtle — they said. They thought that I had a very wealthy fiancé, but they didn't know I was going to work. Because this blue and white limousine would come up, and the guy would tip his hat. [Laughter] So everyone thought, including Mr. Regier, that I had a fiancé. I said, no, I work.

Q: So you were being transported to your job from Peabody in a limousine. I just love it.
[Laughter]

Dutton: That was because after my last class I had to be there in time for the first wake. Because by the time I went on a bus, I would have been late. So it was easier for them to come and get me. But it just gave the wrong, and I didn't realize the wrong impression until much later. Most interesting.

Q: So then were you in music education, or applied voice?

Dutton: I was in music education, but I was planning to get an applied degree. I was doing a lot in voice because I had hoped to go on and get my doctorate while I was in grad school at Peabody. So I did all my music education courses, but I also took additional music, applied music, as much as possible. And I came out twice in the Metropolitan Opera Regional Finals in the top six for two years, so that was a real compliment.

Q: Fabulous.

Dutton: And I won the vocal proficiency award in '66 and I won the Azalia Thomas Theory Prize.

Q: Oh that's a big one.

Dutton: So I won that. I was real pleased with that, plus I had this graduate scholarship for two years and, oh yes, a Senatorial.

Q: Oh that's wonderful. So when you graduated, when did you decide to go into teaching?

Dutton: Well, I had to. To get a senatorial scholarship teaching was mandatory. You had to teach for two years to pay back the money to the State of Maryland.

Q: Okay.

Dutton: So that was the deal — that they would pay your tuition if you promised to teach for them for two years. So that was a small price to pay. I taught in Anne Arundel County for two years, and then I transferred to Baltimore City, and I taught one year, and then I went back to grad school, got a grad scholarship for two years and graduated. But I still had planned to go back and get my doctorate, that never happened.

Q: Who else was teaching at Douglass the year that you were there?

Dutton: The year that I was there was Miss Lois Wright. They had a Lois Wright Recital Series for a while in her honor. She was one of the teachers, and Mr. William Grigsby, Mrs. Marian Smith, and I think myself, and this girl named. Oh dear, she was the instrumental teacher. She married and her name was Claire Koman. And she was superb. She'd come in from the Sorbonne.

Q: So you were living at home while you were a student at Peabody, and what was it like here when you were a student at Peabody?

Dutton: It was interesting because on some levels it was, for some people, not all, but for some it was as though if you could do music, you were equals. Okay? And there was no general reference to skin tone and so forth. And this happened when I was at Western [high school]. I'll never forget it. We were going to, en route to do a concert, I think it was Second Presbyterian Church up on Charles [Street], and either en route there or on the way back, all the girls got out of the car to go and get something to eat, this was the Treblettes. And I just sat there because I knew I couldn't go in. And this is before I got to Peabody, about a year before I got to Peabody. And they all jumped out and they looked around, where's Myrtle. And I said, you go ahead and eat. And they said, cmon, cmon girl. And so I just, oh gosh, I did not want a scene, I did not want to go to jail. Anyway, I said, look, I can't go in. They said oh yes you can, you're human. And they dragged me into the place. And I said, oh gosh, I did not want this scene.

Anyway, what happened was that the waitress waited on everybody and she didn't wait on me. Meanwhile, all the girls had ordered, and I was sitting there, and I knew I was not going to get waited on. So one of the girls said, Myrtle, where's your food. I said, I didn't get waited on. Hey miss, come here, wait on her. I mean, they finally said we can't wait on her. What do you mean you can't wait on her? She's our friend. You can't wait on her?

Anyway, they all, I guess there was about five or six in the car, and they said, if she can't eat, we don't either. And they walked out. But it was so quiet on the way back. They had not—I don't believe it was a set up thing. I think that they actually had forgotten that the rules existed just for that. Which was that I was with them because I was accepted as part of the group, and they were brought back to the reality that these rules exist.

There were some when I was at Peabody who would say, oh, you have a gorgeous voice, but don't forget you're Afro-American. Like, you know, you have a fabulous voice, but, you know, don't forget. How can I forget? Wake up in the morning, look in the mirror and wash my face. But all in all it was a good experience.

And a lot of the men in my class at Peabody were guys coming on the GI Bill, and they were just so glad, I guess, to be out of the military and in school, they really did a lot for forging the relationships back then and forcing the issues. Because they took two Black guys in the frat. [Phi Mu Alpha] And the girls never made it, but the guys became integrated from the get-go. And I was very proud of them. I couldn't say it in those days, and I don't know if they're even around to realize what a breakthrough it was. But it was because they had had that military experience. Where the women hadn't had that experience. I pledged but we missed the date. [Laughter]

I walked around with a soap box. One sock red, one green, you know, I had to wear all these things on the bus. And the people on the street thought I was totally nuts. [Laughter] They didn't know I was pledging. But anyway, maybe it was not so bad.

Q: Well, that pretty much has died out. The sorority has been fairly inactive over the past years. Who were your favorite teachers here at Peabody?

Dutton: Mrs. Baklor, Mr. Hensler, [Louis] Cheslock was fantastic because he could dissect a piece of music so thoroughly like he could get hold of these two part inventions, and you understood when you got through what each note represented, and every possible, you know, thought process. Cross referencing it was only part of this particular, what you call it, theme. It'll be this, it'll be this. If it's going to be part of this theme, it means that. If it's part of that theme, it means the other. And so forth. So he was very, very thorough.

And the other favorite was Mr. Hensler, and my woodwind teacher, Mr. Sidney Forrest was. Because he wanted me to change my major and become a flute player because I found the golden tone. We had to learn all the instruments. We had to pass the first year exam on all the instruments of an orchestra in those days. And there wasn't enough time in the day so what I'd do is go through a whole book on each instrument and get it under my belt. So I was practicing like two weeks learning the whole instrument, learning the whole first book. So I developed this fabulous tone. And he got the guy from the National Symphony to come in and hear me and see if they could talk me into changing my major. I was so embarrassed.

And that week I had to go on to my next instrument, and I lost my golden tone. [Laughter]

Q: Oh no.

Dutton: And Miss Abdallah wanted me to become a conducting major, and I said now wait a minute. They can hardly take me in this school and now I'm going to go up there and try out for a job for the New York Philharmonic because I can conduct. [Laughter] No.

Q: No, that was a hard career for women then.

Dutton: For anybody! I mean, it was difficult even for the men, even more so for a woman. And an Afro-American. Oh no, no!

Q: Well, any woman.

It was a long time before Sara Caldwell.

Q: When did you start studying organ?

Dutton: My father was ordained Methodist clergy, and he would go to different churches. And, of course, I had to go along because my mother wanted to be at his side. She wasn't going to leave us with any strangers. I picked up organ by default. The guy at our church, I can't remember his name, wanted a vacation. He'd been playing like forty years without vacation. Can

you imagine someone playing without a vacation? The only way he got a vacation was to teach me. So he gave me some quick lessons. That was my introduction — so he could take a break. And then it went on from there.

Q: Were you involved in secular — popular music or any sort of music outside of the church besides your teaching.

Dutton: Besides my teaching? Let's see, I did do some concerts around town and overseas, even that was basically church music. I did the "Music Man" in the South Pacific.

Q: Now when was this?

Dutton: This was after I finished grad school. I moved out to the Marianas Islands and I was there for fourteen months, I think it was. And so I got a chance to play the leading lady, Marian, in the "Music Man", and got rave reviews.

Q: Wonderful.

Dutton: And so after that, I came back to the States, and then I went to Spain, spent a while there, got a chance to develop a voice and piano studio for the military dependents that were stationed there. And so that was, I guess you might say, my secular world. And so that was very interesting because I couldn't teach the Spanish people because they had Spaniard teachers, but I could teach the Americans. But that was very interesting. So that was when I did voice and piano, mainly piano students.

While I was there, I joined, they had an international quartet, and I did several concerts in Spain and in Italy. I studied in Italy with the music director at the San Carlo Opera Company. And so that was very interesting. And I did Spanish art songs with Conchita Barria, in Barcelona. I also did some coaching with Victoria de los Angeles' accompanist. His name was Zannetti. So I worked with him for a while. So I got a chance to do some performing.

Q: And then drawn back to Baltimore.

Dutton: Yes. I finally returned back to Baltimore.

Q: When did you return to Baltimore?

Dutton: Well, let's see. That was in '78, I believe it was. I was trying to get back into teaching so I taught at Morgan [State University] for two years, trying to put my foot in the door so I could move to a full time situation, but that didn't work out, moving around with a young child.

She had been to how many Montessori schools before she was five? She started in Madrid and ended up in Columbia [Maryland], then here [in Baltimore]. And that's not good.

I was a product of many schools. It wasn't bad, but you lose something.

Q: Now, did she follow your path into music?

Dutton: She was in the Children's Chorus of Maryland. She sang with them for five years. It was very positive. And that was our first time having a point of meeting — like the ET or the Sistine Chapel. You know, where we could meet, and she understands me and I understood her. The other big thing was when I dragged her to hear Johnny Mathis, and she finally understood how I thought and what was important to me. Don't ask me why, but it was one of those moments.

She's been a real blessing to me.

Q: How old is she now?

Dutton: Oh she's grown. I don't know if she'd want me to say. She's fully grown.

Q: And still pursuing music?

Dutton: No. She's not in music. She just did that as a hobby.

Q: Now, after you came back, you went back into teaching?

Dutton: No. I didn't go back into teaching right away.

Q: So like many of us you had to put the career on hold for the mother years, and finally you were able to get back and start stepping back into the world of music with both feet again.

Dutton: Theoretically.

Q: So which direction did you go? Did you go back to teaching and church music or church music or both?

Dutton: I'm in church music right now. I'm the interim organist at one church right now. And hopefully I will find a full time situation.

Q: Where are you playing now?

Dutton: Oh, I play at Grace Presbyterian. It's been a fun experience.

Q: What kind of music are they doing at Grace?

Dutton: Oh, we do a variety of music, and they have a very complete library, music library. It's going to be a lifetime going through the music library of octavo music. They do what I call a middle of the road type repertoire. They have the Thompsons, all the old traditional anthems.

Q: Has church music changed dramatically since your earliest days?

Dutton: Oh yes.

Q: How do you see the change?

Dutton: Oh, with the rhythms. Because my dad in his church would never had had a drum or a tambourine. It didn't exist. Very traditional, you know. Liturgical type church service. And so the idea of having drums, and a complete combo for a church service, in a sense he wouldn't have ever approved. And it's interesting that you learn to adapt. Because when I was playing for St. Vincent's, we had a combo, drums, guitars, and the whole bit for the masses.

Q: So was your father able to see this change coming and did he talk about that?

Dutton: He was a person that every Saturday we listened to the, was it Texaco on radio — opera. Every Saturday. From the time I was born. So the idea, to him, music was a thing given by God, and it was not supposed to be defiled. We were supposed to keep it in its sacred place.

When you read the stories of the composers — they really got involved. Few people would start to write music. It has to be something out of the ordinary to get you to even take the time to devote to writing music. And so most of the people that have written music have done so because of life-changing experiences. So many of the songs, even when you don't like them, are based many times on a life-changing event in that particular composer's life. You know, I guess it's just a respecting that kind of thing. But he would never have appreciated, you know, the more rock type style. Never.

Q: How do you feel about it?

Dutton: [Laughter] It's changed drastically. I will say that.

Q: It's interesting. I always love listening to people talk about the current trends in church music. I can't speak for you, but I'm probably more in tune with your father's outlook on music as an offering — that you should be offering up the best that you have. But there's the other contingent that feels that they are offering up the best. It's just not to our taste.

Dutton: One is more mental, and the other is more emotional. What I like about one type is that it embraces the mental and emotions. If you can combine those two together — doing a Vivaldi thing — you've got something going on. A mechanical Vivaldi is a mechanical — Am I making any sense?

Q: Absolutely.

Dutton: When you get the two, the best of both worlds, the mental and the emotional, in the Vivaldi piece with all the instrumentation, you have a natural high.

Q: Oh yes.

Dutton: But you cannot duplicate beyond anything that man can make or grow. Erase that. [Laughter] And the thing, is once you get kids exposed to this, it's like wow, you know? But it's so hard to get them past. Because my daughter, when she heard, Johnny Mathis, and she saw the

band, and she heard the band — it was at the Wolftrap with the outdoor ambiance. She was an angry teenager when we got there. By the end tears were running down her cheeks. A transformation had occurred. It's rare to get those moments, but I was very pleased.

Q: But that's the wonderful thing about music is that, you know, it can touch you in ways that almost nothing else can.

Dutton: But there has to be a certain — you're not going to get that touching when you "Off I Go to Music Land" by John Thompson, the first page of that. It takes a while before you get to that level to realize that it's possible.

And most people don't want to stay with it to where they are lifted to that and where they are able to transcend the mundane via music. But it takes quite a bit of effort to get to that level.

Q: What do you think it's going to take? Is this something that needs to happen in the schools? With you it was in the air at home when you were growing up. Is it too late by the time kids start hitting middle school?

Dutton: If I could do anything, I would have people put to sleep listening to symphonies in pre-school. So that every nap time they might hear Brahms all year long. Every pre-schooler would learn that. And just that one thing. The children would get accustomed to a certain sound in no more than thirty minutes a day. And after three years they would start looking for more of that sound. It might not be every child, but it would be one here, one there, one there, and the other.

Q: Cultivating the appetite.

Dutton: There you go. Cultivating the appetite. But right now they don't have access to that. It's so rare. We get the other. You know, 24/7, whatever those numbers are, around the clock, our ears are constantly pounding with this other sound. And they would look forward to that different sound at some point.

Q: Seems like it would work.

Dutton: If I was a Kennedy, I'd even buy the [laughter] CDs. But I'm not a Kennedy. But something that simple can make a difference.

Q: Well, how many of your classmates listened to classical music in middle school and high school?

Dutton: Not that many I don't think. I really don't know. I really couldn't tell you.

Q: There were some wonderful, wonderful people who were in that group that you came in with to Peabody. If you had to point to two or three interesting characters that you were going to school with, who would they be?

Dutton: Every student at Peabody. And I'm not trying to give Peabody a pat on the head, but every student that came here was extraordinary. I mean, and I'm not trying to give them anything more than they deserve. Am I making sense?

Q: Absolutely. I know that Peabody was a different world for many of us.

Dutton: I didn't realize it was that different until I got away from it. And when I was overseas, I was organist choir director for a chapel program there. And I know I would not have gotten that job if I had not been a graduate of Peabody. There were many opportunities that I got. I was on boards and did seminars — things like that. One was with the Valley of the Fallen, that was a big monument there, serving as a moderator between Protestant and Catholic youths in fostering closer relations — this type of thing — because people would say, oh she went to Peabody.

Q: And where was this?

Dutton: This was in Spain. And another time I served as a director for a seminar for women who were part of the PWC [Protestant Women of the Chapel] program. Morocco, Spain, Italy, and so forth I was on the staff. I was the only Afro-American. But, you know, it was because I went to Peabody.

Q: So what's next on your agenda?

Dutton: I don't say because I don't want to jinx myself.

Q: But more music.

Dutton: Hopefully. It's too late to become a nuclear engineer now.

Q: And brain surgery takes too long. [Laughter]

Dutton: If I'm guaranteed another sixty years, I'll probably stay in music.

Q: Are you going to stay in church music?

Dutton: I've been in it all my life. I hope to teach and be church musician. That's what I've done all my life anyway — a dual career of teaching and church music on the side.

END OF INTERVIEW